

Getting the Most Out of Your Internship

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It's that time of the year again when both Superintendents and turf students are looking to fill their internship positions. For all of us, it's an exciting time, putting together or joining a team of workers that will undoubtedly, have a lasting effect and impression on our careers. In the space that follows, I'd like to offer some insight into the internship concept and methods of getting the most out of your internship.

Much of our lives we are working with others, working out arrangements and, developing procedures for our mutual benefit. This fittingly describes what all of us should be focused on as we develop, implement and participate in internship programs at golf courses. Both the Superintendent and the intern should have an understanding that the relationship is developed to be mutually beneficial. An internship position can often lead to a more permanent full-time position at the club where a student completes an internship. Currently at Minnesota Valley Country Club, one of our assistant positions is held by a former intern at the Club. Throughout the dozens of internship relationships that I've been involved with, the focus has been on developing the intern's skills so they are prepared for an Assistant's position once they complete their degree program.

My involvement with student interns has made me a better manager and has developed many lasting relationships. If your club has not established an internship program, now is a good time to start. An intern program benefits students, and will also benefit your club, your staff and the profession.

Developing or attaining a quality internship requires us to evaluate how we could best benefit from the experience.

Outlining your goals before you begin an interview process would be a good way to start. As you prepare these goals, don't expect your first draft to be your final draft. Make it detailed, make it complete, and make it challenging. Remember, the

This brings me to a point that I must bring to light. I speak to many prospective interns that have a limited understanding of the skills they need to advance to the next level in their careers. For the majority of interns, that next level would either be

a full-time spray technician position or a full-time Assistant position. If you're unsure of what you need to develop, find people in the profession that will share with you the written job descriptions for those positions at their club. It would be helpful for any prospective intern to discuss these skill sets with the Superintendent during the interview, and as Superintendents, we should be willing and able to shed light on this subject with the person we're interviewing.

Be on the level here also, as a student applying

for an internship, don't exaggerate or make-up skill levels. The same is true for the Superintendent conducting the interview; don't mislead students into thinking they have the skills needed when they truly do not. This truthful exchange of information will most often lead to the two parties working out a better internship arrangement that is mutually beneficial, an arrangement that allows the students to develop the skills that they need to move to the next level. Even if you've made the decision not to hire someone, give them the insight they need to be more successful in their next interview.

You've heard it before, and you'll hear it again here, good communication is the foundation of good professional relationships. Acknowledge this and practice it throughout the internship and it will be more meaningful and successful. Aside from being a good turf manager, communication is the most important skill that

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Minnesota Valley Country Club Superintendent Michael Brower next to the annual historical equipment display during MVCC's Heritage tournament.

experience will in one way or another, for both employer and employee, leave impressions, impact the business and shape your careers.

For Superintendents, the process should involve your full-time staff and the General Manager. Gather input from them as to how your facility can benefit from an internship program. Involve all of them from the start and establish methods for their involvement in the program. This will maximize the benefit for both the club and the intern.

For the prospective interns, the process should begin with an assessment of their current skills and education in turfgrass management. Identify your strongest and weakest skill sets, and create a list of goals for an internship that will help you build new skills. Then search for an internship that will allow you to reach those goals. A prospective intern arriving at the interview with a list of goals and skills they would like to develop makes a good first impression.



Minnesota Valley Country Club's Assistant Superintendents, Troy Lang, on tractor, graduate of Western Iowa Technical College, and Brady Scott, graduate of the University of Massachusetts, stripping sod on a tee renovation project.

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you can possess in life. In any internship, the Superintendent and the full-time staff become teachers. We can set the tone for the learning environment with effective communication. On the flipside, the student also needs to seize the opportunity by interacting with staff and starting dialogue. After all, how can anyone expect to develop a good relationship without communicating? So, let's make sure that we're all on the same page and communicate.

Now that we've presented some fundamentals for establishing an internship, let's look at it in greater detail. Let's examine what can and should be learned in a golf course management internship. As I've mentioned, each intern is coming into the workplace with different levels of skills. Knowing what they are will help the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendents determine what types of jobs to assign to interns and the duration of work needed to attain a desirable skill level. In no special order, the following is a list of the skills that I believe are most important to develop during an internship.

Pesticide Applications: Arguably the most important, since this is one of the first job responsibilities listed on Assistant Superintendents job descriptions. If you haven't done it, and learned it, how could you properly supervise the activity? I always have on hand several copies of the MDA Pesticide Applicators Training Manuals to lend to interns. I tell them to

study it and take the exam, otherwise they won't get the experience and probably won't get to the next level as soon as they expected. We pay for the testing fee and the license for them. It's well worth the small investment.

Start interns out with another experienced applicator, as the hose man or just following in their shadow. Be sure that interns become familiar with the material their applying and why they're being applied. Remember, this goes both ways, interns need to dedicate themselves to a detailed knowledge of the materials, rates and the chemistries of the products, not just applying the material as instructed. I realize it's uncomfortable and time-consuming at times, but do not cut corners on safety, PPE, and proper records. If you don't have this skill when applying for top Assistant jobs, how could you expect to get the job?

Fertilizer Applications: Ditto here! Start interns out with something easier, like the practice tees and range, where a small mistake could be tolerated. Move on to rough and tees, then fairways and greens. Don't just send them out with a rate and a product, spend plenty of time with them and insist on extreme accuracy. Show them the small things that result in a good application. Between this and pesticides, there's a large amount of the budget going down on the course, so it better be right. Again, another skill that is required for Assistant positions.

Flowers and Gardening: Most courses don't have the luxury of having a full-time gardener. You need to have the knowledge and skill to succeed here. To some of your

members, this is more important than the grass. Even if you do have a gardener, how could you supervise those activities properly without knowledge of them? Spend a day or two working with and getting to know the annuals, perennials and other ornamentals on the course. As you go about your other job duties, don't just drive by them, observe them throughout the summer and learn their traits.

Topdressing, Seeding, Aeration, Spiking, Verticutting: Be ready willing and able to learn these important cultural practices; there may be a limited amount of opportunities in the time you're at the course to learn these jobs, so be sure to speak up, volunteer, ask questions, analyze the process and take notes on it. Keeping good notes on equipment settings, timing, course conditions, recovery, etc. could really come in handy at your next job or the next season. Superintendent, it's not always easy, but find a way to fit interns into these procedures, since they can bring you to another level if done properly and at the right time.

Irrigation Operation and Maintenance: We all know that this is a skill that must be learned first hand. Watching it being done is nothing like doing it. It shouldn't be hard to find components of your system that need upgrading or additions so that interns can learn first hand in the field. At a minimum, interns should fix a pipe break or two, repair and replace a sprinkler, be introduced to the inside of a satellite, tour and learn the pump station and learn about the computer software that runs the system. Take the opportunity to come to the course in the evening to watch the irrigation run, watching the pump station operate, and watching how various areas of the course react to watering.

Construction Projects: Somewhat difficult work experience to obtain since most of this is done in the fall and early spring, however, it's great to have. Don't be too concerned about what job task you're assigned on the site; rather, be happy being a part of the project. Remember, each and every job is important on the project and factors into the end result. Observe the big picture while you work on the job site. Ask the Superintendent for a copy of the Long Range Plan for the Golf Course if there is one, and strike up a conversation with the construction contractor and architect at the end of the day. Remember about communication and dialogue.

Green Committee Meetings: Attending just one Green Committee meeting is great for an intern. Simply observing how the

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meeting is run and what's on the agenda is a great learning experience.

Course Setup: This is an extremely important work skill for interns to develop. I'm still surprised at the lack of interest in doing this by some interns. To me, it's the best job on the course every day, for sure. And much of the time, it's the most important one. Cutting cups and setting markers has a huge effect on the presentation of the course. The best course set-up people are the ones who know and play the game, so learn and play the course. It's best to place an intern on this job assignment for a minimum of two consecutive weeks. It takes that amount of time to get the hang of it, fine tune methods and learn about traffic and wear patterns. This is an area that the Superintendent and Assistant should spend a good deal of time on with interns if they need it. You won't be a great Assistant or Superintendent without knowing this job inside and out.

Scouting the Course: Often done in conjunction with course set-up, and part of any successful golf course management program. Many courses develop and maintain a daily log to make scouting more routine and useful. Interns would be wise to keep their own journal or daily log. Superintendents should provide staff and interns with a microscope and diagnostic tools to use on their own time.

Assigning Jobs and Supervising Staff: This is a full-time job in itself at most golf courses, typically the responsibility of the Assistant or First Assistant. Create an opportunity for the intern to run the job board for a day or two, or shadow the person responsible for it for a day. This is another job skill that employers look for when hiring Assistants. This is an eye opener for any intern, and a valuable experience.

Equipment Maintenance: Pick a few days when there's a good amount of mower set-up going on, and have the intern spend them in the shop with the Equipment Manager, participating and learning about mower set-up and anything else that may arise during the course of the day.

Day-to Day Maintenance Activities: A good worker realizes that each job and every detail on the course is important to the overall success of the golf course. Any intern will be expected to do each and every job on the golf course and in the maintenance facility, and the person

responsible for assigning jobs should see to it that the intern does each and every job duty several times. You do what needs to be done when it needs to be done, no eyebrows raised!

Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program: I've never met an employee that didn't enjoy working with activities involving this program. It's a great program, and one that nearly every prospective intern asks me about in an interview. It thrills me to see the interest in this great program, and interns should have an opportunity to be involved in it. Last year we involved our students with work at the local elementary school that we've adopted through the program – another great learning experience for all involved.

Practice Facilities Maintenance: Practice facilities often require different methods, frequencies, and timing of maintenance activities. Interns need to be involved for a time preparing these highly used areas.

Turfgrass Nurseries and Research: Challenge yourself and the intern by conducting some type of research at your golf course. It can be something very simple like monitoring soil temperature and comparing that with root depth. Last year we had our interns involved in an addition to our bentgrass green nursery. We're currently arranging research with an intern dealing with our naturalized, no-mow area, and we'll be working with students to establish a 20,000 square foot grass research site this year.

Soils and Soil Analysis: Much of our success on the golf course revolves around our soils and the roots that grown within. Learn and teach about the soils that you cross each day on the golf course. Develop a soil analysis schedule and have interns do the work and study the reports.

Greens: Some emphasis should be placed on learning about the greens. They're the bread and butter of courses. Learn the grass, the soils, the height of cut, the cultural practices and requirements. Learn the differences between green sites, and how that's managed. Tissue sampling from greens provides a benefit to the Superintendent, and also provides an intern with a great research project.

On Your Own Time Reading, Etc.: Sure, you work a lot of hours at the course. But don't think the learning has to stop once you punch out each day. Read and reference textbooks in the evening.

My advice to students is, always try to arrange an internship at the type of golf course that you eventually would like to be the Superintendent at. Establish early

on what type of club you would like to work at, and seek that level of maintenance and work experience from the start. Get your foot in the door as they say, do the dirty work, put the long hours in, all the while you're learning, and it will pay off in the end. If your desire is to work at a well-known, big-name club, then go there and work now. Build that resume starting now.

When an internship comes to an end, do some things to make the experience even better. Some schools require an in-depth, written and well-presented reports, others require little more than a few notes jotted down on some forms that the school gives them. I prefer the former, a well written, in-depth report on the internship. Cover all of the skill areas listed, and add sections on each of the golf course features such as greens and tees. Do one regardless of what's required by your school. It will do several things for you. It will be a lesson in writing, it will require you to record the things you saw and learned, and your report can be used by you for future reference. Give a copy to the golf course you worked at, and give a copy to your school advisor. Immediately upon completion of your internship, handwrite thank you cards to everyone that you developed a relationship with at the club, from the Golf Professional to the Mechanic. This will set you apart from the rest of the pack.

For students participating in any internship, it's very important to remember that you are beginning to establish your image in the profession. Keep this in mind at all times from this point forward. A good professional image begins with the way you look and act, so begin to dress, groom and act like a professional. This is all very dependent on the attitude you bring to the job in the morning. As a Superintendent, I expect interns to be a cut above the rest of the staff, with regard to attitude and performance. So stay positive, and be thinking and learning each step of the way during your internship. And as Superintendents and Assistants, we need to develop superior learning arrangements for students, and set the tone for the learning environment with effective communication.

(Editor's Note: Michael Brower is the Golf Course Superintendent at Minnesota Valley Country Club in Bloomington, Minn., He is a graduate of the Turfgrass Management Program at Pennsylvania State University, and has been a member of the MGCSA and the GCSAA since 1988. He can be reached at, mbrower@mvcgolf.com)